



AGILITY IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY
UCEA STRATEGIC PLAN

APRIL 2021 - SEPTEMBER 2023



ABOUT UCEA

The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) represents higher education institutions in their role as employers. Our purpose is to support our member organisations in delivering excellent and world leading higher education and research by facilitating their work in delivering effective employment and workforce strategies.



Introduction

We have all been dealing with so much uncertainty for some time now. The dramatic effects of Covid-19 could never have been predicted; we all had to respond so swiftly and in unprecedented ways. These dramatic events came on top of significant changes and challenges already facing the higher education (HE) sector: the effects of Brexit, changes to sector finances and pressures on pay and pensions to name a few.

The cumulative effect of the challenges we face are significant, and we will be navigating them for some time. Taken together, they result in a precarious and uncertain landscape ahead.

And this is why we need to be agile. The uncertainty we are all managing requires us to be constantly attuned to the changing environment, predicting developments where possible and responding to changes as comprehensively and swiftly as possible.

In developing *Agility in a time of uncertainty*, there were a number of principles that UCEA wanted to weave through our plans. Taken together, we believe these principles underpin the approach we want to take in achieving our plans, providing a guide to the way we work.

- We want to be **constantly attuned to members' needs**, anticipating changes and being swift in our response, providing tailored high-quality support.
- We want to be **proactive in anticipating the changing external environment** and using our insight and expertise to anticipate what that may mean for universities and HE colleges, particularly in their role as employers.
- We will take a **collective approach**, ensuring we work in collaboration with others where possible; this will involve building and maintaining meaningful relationships based on trust and mutual respect.
- We want to ensure we **capture learning from the past year**, where we have had to adapt quickly and take the benefits of new ways of working and blend them with the positives of what went before.
- We will **be as inclusive as possible**; reaching into members and having meaningful engagement at many levels, understanding the range of members we have, ensuring our Board reflects the range of organisations we represent, wherever possible, and remaining an inclusive place to work, that understands and values diversity of thought and identity.

These principles – constantly attuned to members' needs, proactive in anticipating the changing external environment, taking a collective approach, capture learning from the past year, being as inclusive as possible – have helped us in developing our four strategic priorities:

1. Promoting constructive employment relations
2. Supporting employer aspirations to enhance the employee experience
3. Supporting members through our influence and engagement
4. Taking forward UCEA in support of our members

These priorities provide a framework to how we organise the key activities that we will pursue over the coming 30 months. We have purposefully developed our strategic plan over a shorter timescale than normal due to the levels of uncertainty that we are all facing. Instead we need a bridging programme of work that would address key pressing priorities.

We will report back on progress to our members and partners at least annually on what we have achieved so far, what we will do next, and where we have had to flex our plans if necessary.

Context and Challenges

While we have been developing our strategy, the United Kingdom (UK) has been in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic. The changes to how we manage every aspect of our lives have brought specific challenges to the HE sector.

How the sector delivers its core purpose of world class teaching and research has changed dramatically, with remote learning and working for the majority and socially distanced for the rest. Student and staff wellbeing needs have become more acute, with the challenges of self-isolating, juggling work and study with caring responsibilities and general increased anxiety.

Remote learning has resulted in some students demanding refunds on rent and fees, higher education institutions (HEIs) are unable to rent out space and there are costs associated with making premises 'Covid-secure.' And there have been examples of industrial relations becoming more strained at least locally, with concerns regarding staff safety.

Covid-19 has come when there was already pressure on finances within the sector, exacerbating the situation. The introduction of tuition fees (although not in Scotland) and reduction of public subsidies has resulted in a commercially driven sector, especially with regard to teaching. This has also increased student expectations, putting pressure on the need to invest in estates.

The UK's decision to leave the European Union (EU) which came into effect on 1 January 2021, is also exacerbating financial pressures and causing operational challenges. It is as yet unclear the impact this will have on international student numbers from both the EU and elsewhere, and processing students and staff from the EU is now more complicated.

And financial pressure of course will affect pay. In a context of unprecedented uncertainty, there are both real and perceived problems to maintaining the reputation of HE as a sector of model employers. The last two years have seen industrial relations come under significant strain. The need for pay moderation within the sector will place pressure on pay negotiations and the collective bargaining machinery.

Pensions have traditionally been an important employment benefit for staff in HE but, across the sector, there are continuing complexities in maintaining this element of the reward package. The Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) has been the subject of repeated industrial action, while the most recent calculations show a sharp rise in its funding deficit due in part to deteriorating market conditions resulting from the impact of Covid-19. HEIs in the public sector pensions schemes would value additional flexibility to manage the costs and risks associated with scheme membership, given the anticipated funding shortfalls in many institutions.

Taken together – Covid-19, financial pressures, Brexit, pay and pensions - these challenges present unprecedented uncertainty for the HE sector in the years ahead.



1. Promoting constructive employment relations

UCEA wants to work collaboratively with our partners wherever possible. This means building working relationships with the HE trade unions that are based on trust and mutual respect. We believe this will improve not only national but local working relationships too.

As such, we want to negotiate with the unions in a way that reflects this: fairly, with an understanding of different perspectives, and making progress towards an outcome that all can agree with. This may mean alternative models for bargaining – something that we feel is worth exploring. It also means collaborating on projects of mutual interest, which will move us towards fair and affordable total reward and an enriching employee experience.

What we will do

- We will work with all our partners, including the HE trade unions, to develop relationships based on mutual trust and respect that foster productive dialogue on a range of issues.
- We will identify opportunities for improved partnership working with unions. This is likely to include systemic pay issues such as how gender and ethnicity intersect to result in pay gaps.
- Building on what we already know, we will develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what our members want from collective bargaining, the outcomes they wish to see and how they want it achieved.
- We will work in collaboration with our members and partners to explore possible alternative models for bargaining with the ambition of achieving a fit for purpose method for agreeing pay within the sector that supports our members to be progressive employers.
- We recognise that at times agreement cannot be reached and in such instances, we will prepare for and support members through any disputes and/or industrial action.

When these activities are realised...

Building on the high levels of satisfaction with current UCEA services among members, HEIs will feel supported by UCEA in their role as progressive employers.

Levels of trust and respect between UCEA and our partners will grow.

Many of our relationships with our partners will have improved and there will be two-way open and honest dialogue taking place.

We will have more programmes of work operating that seek to achieve outcomes based on mutual interest.

We will measure how successful these activities have been by...

Asking our members about the level of support they have had from us via our flagship triennial membership survey and draw upon other regular contact such as visits to institutions and pulse surveys.

Conducting stakeholder perceptions work, to measure and track the relationships we have with our partners.

Being able to identify joint programmes of work with a range of partners and measuring joint outputs.



2. Supporting employer aspirations to enhance the employee experience

As the representative of HEIs as employers, UCEA can uniquely support our members in enhancing the compact between them as employers and their employees. This is about the holistic experience a member of staff has with their workplace, from total reward to their sense of belonging.

The impetus to do this work was already becoming acute, with increasing diversity in the workforce bringing a broader range of aspirations and expectations of careers among employees. But more than ever, Covid-19 has had a dramatic impact on how we work and the relationship between employers and employees. We want to support members in ensuring people management approaches remain relevant, bringing together expertise to help define and develop good practice.

What we will do

- We will promote discussion among our members and experts on what the ‘employee experience’ encompasses, the employer role in enhancing it and how a better employee experience can help our members achieve their overall strategic goals.
- We will work with both employers and employees to identify good practice on reward and motivation.
- We will work with our members and partners to articulate the benefits of working within the HE sector.
- We will examine the contribution of the pay spine and other mechanisms to support members’ reward strategies, particularly in respect of staff recruitment and retention, addressing pay gaps and recognising individual contribution.

- We will assess the reward implications of the increasing use of defined contribution pension schemes across the sector.
- We will develop our understanding of the needs of employers and employees in relation to pension scheme flexibility and will lobby against any further increases in employer contributions in the 2020 scheme valuations.
- We will support members through the 2020 USS valuation and implementation of any resulting changes, including any potential associated industrial action.
- We will explore the best mechanisms for managing total reward, seeking to deliver fair and affordable outcomes.

When these activities are realised...

We, our members and our partners in the HE sector will have a better understanding of what a good employee experience means.

We and our members will have an improved understanding of what employees expect and value from their reward packages.

We, our members and our partners will have a shared understanding of the benefits of working in HE, which will be clearly articulated and promoted to those working in and outside the sector.

We will measure how successful these activities have been by...

Conducting pulse surveys of our members to complement our triennial membership survey and will build on anecdotal feedback from increased face-to-face engagement.

Measuring engagement among members with our resources, such as our website, events, and embedding any learning to improve engagement further.



3. Supporting members through our influence and engagement

UCEA is uniquely placed to speak for our members and to make a compelling case for HEIs as progressive employers. We work to be both responsive to emerging needs and proactive at anticipating issues that will be of importance. This involves ensuring our channels for influencing external stakeholders and engaging with members are best in class, bringing together leaders and influencers to share expertise with HEIs and facilitating peer support among members. In doing so, we must of course recognise that decisions affecting HE will be made in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as in Westminster.

What we will do

- o Working with members and partners, explore new opportunities to engage them, building on the successful delivery of regular virtual events, networks and meetings to develop channels.
- o Working in collaboration with our members and partners to maximise impact and minimise duplication, develop a strategy to influence government across the UK and other key stakeholders, working to ensure our members' needs are understood and reflected.
- o Develop a digital strategy to ensure we engage with our members and partners as effectively as possible and that our content is accessed by intended audiences.
- o Be both proactive and responsive in our media engagement, ensuring our messages reach a wide audience and working with partners and members to amplify messages where appropriate.
- o Develop our thought leadership offer to stimulate thinking in the sector across the latest developments in a wide range of policy matters, in particular supporting members to be progressive employers and demonstrating good practice in this endeavour.

When these activities are realised...

Our content, insights and messages will reach our members and partners through a range of channels and formats.

We will be engaging with members and partners through a range of means, tailoring content and deployment when appropriate.

We will know how members and partners want to be engaged with and be using that insight to inform every communication and engagement opportunity.

We will measure how successful these activities have been by...

Measuring member satisfaction with the engagement they have with us via our flagship membership triennial survey, more regular pulse surveys and visits.

Conducting stakeholder preference work to measure how satisfied our partners are with how we engage with them.

Gathering and analysing feedback from events and other engagement opportunities with members and embedding learning to improve satisfaction with these resources where appropriate.

Measuring engagement among members with our resources, such as our website, events, and embed any learning to improve engagement further.



4. Taking forward UCEA in support of our members

Covid-19 and other recent challenges demonstrate how important it is that we are constantly attuned to members' needs, swift in our response, as well as seeking to anticipate challenges and opportunities, before they have fully materialised.

We want to enhance the already extensive engagement we have with our members, so we understand their needs, and use this insight to develop our member services, ensuring any new areas of work are aligned with our core mission and objectives. We need to do this while remaining financially sustainable, ensuring we are a rewarding place to work for our staff and our governance arrangements are as diverse and inclusive as possible.

What we will do

- We will review our member offer, seeking to improve the use and accessibility of UCEA resources and communications.
- We will undertake regular membership visits (virtual or in-person), seeking feedback on our activities and ensuring we provide value for money.
- We will develop new opportunities to further support members through bespoke consultancy work on pay benchmarking or other employment matters.
- We will develop a financial strategy to maintain reserves at an appropriate level having, for 2020-21, frozen subscription fees and run a deficit budget.
- We will develop ways of working for staff that encompass the best of both remote and office working and build on the support we have already offered staff regarding their health and wellbeing by providing renewed opportunities for learning and career development.
- We will monitor our governance and decision-making arrangements to ensure UCEA reflects institutional diversity on our Board while maintaining a common approach to lobbying and negotiation.

- We will conduct a Board effectiveness review. This will include examining how the Board can be reflective of our membership, improving diversity and seek to identify any unanticipated barriers to participation.

When these activities are realised...

Our members will make better use of our resources because we will have a better understanding of their needs.

Our staff will be more satisfied in their roles because they will be better able to fulfil their potential.

Our Board will be more diverse and more engaged in our work because there will be fewer barriers to participation.

We will measure how successful these activities have been by...

Conducting pulse surveys of our members to complement our triennial membership survey and will build on anecdotal feedback from increased face-to-face engagement.

Measuring engagement among members with our resources and embedding any learning.

Designing and implementing meaningful mechanisms for staff to provide feedback. This will include a staff survey and continuous feedback through regular face-to-face engagement.

Capturing and publishing information on the diversity of our Board and putting in place positive actions to improve diversity.



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